AMATEURADIO

News of the Amateur Radio and Amateur Satellite Services

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HAM RADIO PROVIDES BLOW-BY-BLOW ACCOUNT OF HURRICANE ALLEN'S BOUT WITH CARIBBEAN ISLANDS

Packing winds sometimes in excess of 175-mph, Hurricane Allen opened the 1980 season by causing death and destruction along its 2500-mile trek across much of the Caribbean Sea and into the Gulf of Mexico.

Amateur Radio operators, many of whom assisted civil emergency preparedness officials last year when Hurricane David mercilessly tore through Dominica and the Dominican Republic, again provided emergency and health and welfare communications when Hurricane Allen marched through much of the same area last month.

Operating through a hurricane watch net which extended across the U.S. and into the Caribbean, radio amateurs relayed weather reports to and from the National Weather Service's hurricane center in Miami, Florida, as well as on-the-scene damage reports to civil emergency preparedness officials. By tracking the storm's progress as it made its way towards the Gulf coast of the U.S., radio amateurs were able to provide advance warning to island inhabitants in Allen's path.

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Scenes like this were commonplace as Hurricane Allen brought death and destruction to much of the Caribbean. In many places Amateur Radio replaced conventional communication lines knocked out by Allen's 175-mph winds. (photo by Robert Denniston)

According to some sources, newly installed Amateur Radio equipment at the Miami hurricane center provided weather specialists with such effective up-to-the-minute information that some of the weathermen were referring to the Amateur Service as their "communications department" when talking to the news media.

On the evening of August 9 Amateur Radio again played a dramatic role when Hurricane Allen, now on a collision course with the U.S., suddenly stopped off the south Texas coast, about 30 miles from Brownsville. Forecasters in Brownsville, unable to contact Miami through conventional means because area communication lines were out, used Amateur Radio operators to relay pertinent information to hurricane specialists in Miami, who were then able to advise the Brownsville weather center.

AMATEUR HURRICANE WATCH IN MIAMI KEEPS EYE ON ALLEN

Public service communication has been a traditional responsibility of the Amateur Radio Service since 1913, when the first known emergency communication was conducted by a radio amateur. In today's Amateur Radio, this public service tradition plays a vital part in a highly organized day-to-day operation.

The amateurs who "come out" during emergencies (such as Hurricane Allen) are not just a ragtag group of radio enthusiasts, but trained communicators, many of whom are affiliated with the American Radio Relay League's public service field organization: the Amateur Radio Emergency Service (ARES). which supplies needed communications on the community, county and state levels; and the National Traffic System (NTS), which connects the various ARES groups by providing for a systematic flow of medium and long-range radio messages.

One such ARES group is the Dade County (Florida) Amateur Radio Public Service Corps (ARPSC), which consists of representatives of each ARRL-affiliated Amateur Radio club (including Spanish-speaking clubs) in the Miami area.

Recently, when Hurricane Allen swept the Caribbean islands, the Dade County radio group set up a station at the National Weather Service's hurricane center in Miami, providing weather specialists there with immediate contact with radio amateurs in the affected areas.

According to Michael Morton, one of a dozen amateur radio operators stationed at the hurricane center, it was the first time an amateur station was established there when Miami itself wasn't directly threatened. In the past, says Morton, local ham groups were used only to relay messages from shelter to shelter when a hurricane or some other disaster hit the Miami area.

Morton and crew kept the station operating from 8 a.m. to midnight for the duration, giving Caribbean island residents the latest word on Allen's location and taking damage and distress calls for the Red Cross and Coast Guard.

Morton says local ham groups meet regularly to keep themselves and their disaster plans at the ready in case they are needed. In Miami alone, says Morton, there are 150 to 200 radio amateurs who would be on duty should there be an emergency. Thousands more, at various locations, are standing by to help should they be called upon.

"We do it as a donation of our time," says Morton. "It's our way of helping out people all over the world."

PROJECT MOCH: MORSE COMMUNICATION FOR THE HANDICAPPED

A group of students at Glankler School in Fremont, California, are involved in a very special program that could change their lives. The students, ranging in age from 12 to 20, cannot speak or "sign" because of physical handicaps.

The new program, designed by Fremont Amateur Radio operator Stu Langs, provides for classroom instruction in sending and receiving Morse code for the handicapped students, their parents and teachers.

For the first time the children will be able to "speak" in group conversations or tell their parents about their day's events by using a device that converts the dits and dahs of Morse code the students tap out into numbers and letters on a display panel.

Project director Sharon Williams says Project Moch will open many doors for handicapped persons. If the pilot project works as well as expected, she adds, the program may go nation-wide and qualified Morse code instructors across the country will be needed. -- Jane Bell, Fremont, CA.

Project MOCH director, Sharon Williams, an amateur radio operator, instructs one of her handicapped students in sending and receiving Morse code. (photo by Jeff Pinto)

Members of the Tektronix Employees Radio Amateur Club (TERAC) from Beaverton, Oregon helped set up radio controlled remote camera equipment at this U.S. Geological Survey post, about 10 miles north of Mount St. Helens. This site is now under several feet of volcanic ash. (photo by Roger McCoy)

RADIO AMATEURS HELP MT. ST. HELENS RESEARCHERS

In the confusion immediately following the May 18 eruption of Mount St. Helens, many unhappy researchers, unable to meet an essential Forest Service safety requirement, were not permitted to enter the area surrounding the volcano.

But area Amateur Radio operators have helped researchers vault that hurdle -- a requirement for two-way radio communication in the field and a continually manned base station near a telephone -- by providing that very service.

Two members of the Tektronix Employees Amateur Radio Club in Beaverton, Oregon, Dave Lievsay and Roger McCoy, have acted as middlemen in helping researchers find Amateur Radio operators to accompany scientific parties to the mountain.

In a little more than two months, Lievsay and McCoy have set up 71 "missions" to the mountain, some of them including as many as 10 daily trips. Another amateur operator maintains a base station in Portland. The amateurs volunteer their time and equipment.

Forest Service officials in Washington said the reason for the requirement is to enable their people to immediately contact field research groups and evacuate them should the need arise.

The Forest Service, if it wanted to evacuate the area, would telephone the base station operator who, in turn, would tell the amateur operator with the field party to get the group out.

According to the Forest Service, scientific parties have been called out of the mountain's "red zone" three times so far, when spotter planes observed activity in the volcano's crater. In all cases, said Forest Service officials, the radio communication and evacuation plans worked well.

WANT TO KNOW MORE ABOUT THE AMATEUR RADIO SERVICE? Contact Perry Williams, ARRL's Washington Area Coordinator, and arrange for a personal visit by calling (202) 296-9107.

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ALONG LEAGUE LINES

This issue of AMATEURADIO is devoted to the public service role which the Amateur Radio Service plays, particularly during emergencies when normal lines of communication are down. Amateur Radio responds quickly and effectively when needed, and it is important to note that the emergency capability of radio amateurs doesn't "just happen," but can be attributed to two very basic characteristics of the Amateur Radio Service which are often taken for granted.

First, Amateur Radio is an internationally recognized service. Almost every country, regardless of ideology, has an active Amateur Radio Service. In many instances (such as recent earthquakes in Italy and Guatemala) radio amateurs are the first to be at the scene relaying essential health and welfare traffic to the outside world not affected by the disaster. Because Amateur Radio is international in scope, chances are good that, no matter where in the world an emergency occurs, an amateur will be close by.

Second, there is a great deal of flexibility built into the Amateur Radio Service. Amateurs have access to different frequency bands of operation, different powers, even different modes (voice, Morse code, radioteletype). One cannot predict when or where disaster will strike, but the ability of Amateur Radio to adapt makes it better able to overcome most obstacles such as terrain, distance, or atmospheric conditions which could hinder the effectiveness of other radio services.

From time to time we see various proposals which would change some of the fundamental characteristics of the Amateur Radio Service. Certainly some change is desirable as technology is developing at a rapid pace. Yet there are certain fundamentals which enable Amateur Radio to be the effective instrument it is. We must never lose sight of that fact.

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